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Thousands Expected to Remember '57

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ARKANSAS TOURISM Officials are hoping people not only will remember the past but will be compelled to commemorate it.

This September marks the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School, and several groups have planned wall-to-wall events to mark the occasion. As a tourism generator, it is being compared with the November 2004 opening of Clinton Presidential Library.

The Arkansas Department of Parks & Tourism is already pitching the story of the anniversary to travel writers across the country. And the move has paid off. The Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun published article last month about Central High School.

The department also plans on featuring pictures of Central High in its general advertising campaign to lure people to Arkansas.

The campaign will target several demographics, including African-Americans, said Richard Davies, director of Parks & Tourism.

"You have people who were interested in the civil rights movement [and] history buffs," Davies said. "And don't underestimate the fact that people will come to see the high school just because it's there."

In 2005, then-Little Rock Mayor Jim Dailey created the Central High School 50th Anniversary Commission, which is organizing several of the events planned for the week of Sept. 22-Sept. 25. The commission is spending about \$500,000 on the events.

At the commission's meeting March 7, it is expected to hire a public relations firm, said Scott Carter, public relations manager for the city of Little Rock.

"I hate calling this a tourism event because in a lot of people's minds it downplays the significance of the event," Carter said. "You know, we're not trying to create Disneyland. We're trying to mark this event."

Some big names already have committed to coming to the activities, including entertainer Bill Cosby, talk show host Tavis Smiley and former President Bill Clinton.

Newsweek magazine also listed the Central High School ceremony as a place to be for would-be presidential candidates, including U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Barack Obama, D-Ill.

President Bush also has been invited to the ceremony, but organizers say they haven't received confirmation that he'll attend.

"We expect there will be no more significant place in the world, barring any unforeseen event, than in front of Little Rock Central High School on Tuesday, Sept. 25," said Virgil Miller, a co-chair of the Central High School 50th Anniversary Commission.

But some people would like to hear more publicity now about the anniversary activities.

"I think it could be a big draw for the city. I think it should be a big draw for the city," said Johanna Lewis, a history professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. "But I'm not hearing any sort of buzz."

Lewis said she hopes the commission's advertising agency is able to help attract visitors.

"I probably heard more people talk about it in the African-American community than in the white community," she said. "I think it has incredible potential."

September 1957

In 1954, the Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine that kept black and white students in segregated schools. At the start of the 1957 school year, nine black students were scheduled to be the first students to desegregate Little Rock's Central High School.

But Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the students from entering the school. He said he wanted to protect them, an argument that didn't wash with U.S. District judge Ronald N. Davies. He ruled that Faubus couldn't use the Guard to stop children from attending class and ordered the integration to proceed.

When police couldn't control an angry white mob at the campus, President Eisenhower called in federal troops to protect the Little Rock Nine.

The significance of the desegregation of Central High is that Americans saw that the Constitution would be upheld by the president, Lewis said.

"And Eisenhower, of course, demonstrated the key was upholding the Constitution by sending in the U.S. Army 101st Airborne to make sure the nine African-American students in fact got inside Central High School," Lewis said.

The desegregation of Central High also demonstrated the supremacy of the justice system, she said.

"The Supreme Court can make a decision and tell states and local entities that they will have to follow it, and in fact when everything comes back around, the United States is going to make sure that that happens," Lewis said.

A lot of progress has been made in race relations since September 1957, said Nancy Rousseau, the co-chair of the commission and principal of Central High School.

"I think the fact that our school is almost completely [racially] balanced speaks for itself," she said. "I think we've come a long ways, and I think we have a ways to go."

Planning for the 50th

The Central High School 50th Anniversary Commission has been meeting regularly since its formation in January 2005 to prepare for the event.

One of the highlights of the week of Sept. 24 will be the commemoration ceremony on Central High's front lawn.

Miller said that about \$250,000 will be spent on the Sept. 25 ceremony. Giant video screens will be erected in the school's Quigley Stadium for any overflow crowd, and 5,000 seats will be placed on the school's lawn for guests.

Other events that week include the dedication of the new Central High School National Historic Site Visitors Center, which will be located across the street from the current center at 2125 Daisy Bates Drive.

The National Park Service, which runs the center, is handling the publicity for the event, said Spirit Trickey, a park ranger at the site and daughter of one of the Little Rock Nine, Minnijean Brown Trickey.

Spirit Trickey said the Park Service doesn't advertise, but "every time we're out doing an outreach program, we're constantly reminding people of the anniversary."

In 2006, the visitors center received about 40,000 people, she said.

The new center will be 3,000 SF and feature six times more exhibit space than the current center. On Capitol Hill, Sens. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., and Mark Pryor, D-Ark., and Rep. Vic Snyder worked to get Little Rock Nine commemorative coins struck by the U.S. Mint. The mint will issue up to 500,000 of the \$1 coins, which feature a picture of Central High School on one side and the image of children's legs and nine stars on the other side.

"This Congressional coin pays tribute to [the Little Rock Nine's] principled stand that has shaped this nation for half a century on our march toward greater equality for all," Lincoln said in an e-mail statement to Arkansas Business.

Tourist Attraction

Richard Davies, of the state Parks & Tourism Department, said it is difficult to say how many people will visit Little Rock as a result of publicity about the anniversary.

"When the events come in September, that will bring a big crowd," he said.

He said the events will create a lot of media coverage, which he's counting on. Davies predicts viewers will see news coverage of the events and then decide to visit Arkansas. Or visitors might be in a neighboring state and then choose to drive to Little Rock just to see the high school, he said.

Davies said marketing the 50th anniversary as a tourist attraction is somewhat easier than trying to get people to vacation at an amusement park that is available all season every season.

"Magic Springs is something that goes on," he said. "An event like this is sort of like the opening of the Clinton Library. It seems to focus people's attention."

Davies also said that attracting history buffs benefits Arkansas because they have a better chance of being repeat travelers than people who visit the state strictly for recreation.

"Our job is to get people to come here and spend their money," Davies said.

Carter, with the city of Little Rock, said the city will see benefits of the anniversary events for months and even years to come.

"It's similar to when the Clinton Library opened," he said. "For six, seven, eight months after that, numerous newspapers did articles about Little Rock as a tourism destination."